
Historical Readings of the Velvikudi Inscription

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Abstract: The Velvikudi Copper Plate inscription, issued by Pandya king Nedunjadaiyan Varaguna-Varman I in the 8th century CE, provides perspective on the socio-political and cultural environment of early medieval South India. This inscription, a document of land restoration, has become essential in the study of Tamilakam during the Kalabhra period, a time spanning the 3rd to 7th centuries CE. Pioneering scholars of South India, this era has been viewed as a "Dark Age," often characterised by political instability and societal disruption. The Kalabhras, described as heterodox rulers who disrupted Brahmanical authority, were seen as a force of chaos, challenging the established political and religious structures. The inscription records the restoration of land to a Brahmin named Narkorran, whose family's property had been confiscated, presumably during the Kalabhra rule. This act of land restoration, emphasised in both Sanskrit and Tamil, reflects the commitment of Pandya rulers to reinstating Brahmanical norms, suggesting that their rule was not just about consolidating power but also about ideologically positioning themselves as protectors of orthodoxy. This inscription challenges the monolithic depiction of the Kalabhra period as purely disruptive, instead highlighting a dynamic process of cultural integration, adaptation, and restoration that defined early medieval South India.

Keywords: Inscriptions, South India, Copper Plates, Kalabhra Period, Pandya Dynasty, Tamilakam, Brahmanical Authority

Introduction

Inscriptions are crucial primary sources for piecing together the history of South India, especially for periods where literary records are sparse or lost. Among such sources, copper plate inscriptions provide insights into the socio-political structure, administrative functions, and religious affiliations of various dynasties. These inscriptions capture the dynamics of periods that might otherwise remain obscure, allowing historians to discern the transformations in governance, social structure, and religious patronage over time (Mahalingam 1967: 40). One particularly complex period in South Indian history is the Kalabhra interregnum, spanning from approximately the 3rd to the 6th centuries CE. This era has often been depicted as a "dark age" due to its perceived interruption of the established political and social order, with the Kalabhras portrayed as heterodox rulers who disrupted traditional Brahmanical authority (Sastri 1955: 106). The scarcity of direct records from the Kalabhras and the reliance on

accounts from later dynasties contribute to this portrayal, as inscriptions from the Pallavas, Chalukyas, and Pandyas framed the Kalabhra period as one of chaos and decline. This document, recording the restoration of Brahmin-held lands, allows us to explore the Kalabhra period from a different angle, as it reflects both continuity and change in the socio-political structures of *Tamilakam* (Veluthat 2012: 80; Ramaswamy 1997: 98).

By invoking Shiva at the beginning of the inscription, the Pandyas linked their authority to divine sanction, underscoring the religious and ideological dimensions of the grant (Rajan 2000: 145). This ideological stance was significant; through the restoration of Brahmin land rights, the Pandyas aligned themselves with Brahmanical values and distanced their rule from the Kalabhras, who were often associated with heterodox practices such as Jainism and Buddhism (Ayyangar & Rao 1922: 143). Scholars argue that the Velvikudi plates are not merely legal documents but also political statements, depicting the Kalabhra period as a deviation from the established social order and the Pandya rule as a corrective phase that reinstated Brahmanical authority (Derrett 1968: 217; Stein 1980: 132).

Inscriptions like Velvikudi (Figure 1) serve as a lens through which historians can reconstruct the ideological landscape of early medieval *Tamilakam*, where political power and religious patronage were deeply intertwined. The Pandya rulers, by reasserting Brahmin privileges and legitimising their rule through land grants, effectively used the Velvikudi inscription to reinforce their authority and create a legacy of religious piety and socio-political stability (Sastri 1955: 131). In this sense, the Velvikudi inscription provides more than historical data; it reveals the underlying narrative crafted by the Pandyas to present the Kalabhra period as an anomaly within the broader arc of history of *Tamilakam*.

The Velvikudi Inscription: Background and Content

The inscription begins with an invocation to Shiva, thereby linking the Pandya rule to divine authority and portraying the land grant as a sanctioned act of restoration. This restoration served to reassert Brahmanical privileges, disrupted during the rule of the Kalabhras, who are often depicted as challengers to Brahmanical orthodoxy (Ayyangar & Rao 1922: 143). The inscription is more than a legal document; it is also an ideological tool that frames the Kalabhra period as one of deviation from orthodox values, positioning the Pandyas as restorers of socio-religious order. This portrayal aligns with broader attempts by later dynasties to reconstruct the Kalabhra era as a disruptive phase, in contrast to their own rule, which is depicted as a return to orthodoxy (Stein 1980: 132; Sastri 1976: 98). The document, therefore, not only records a land transaction but also symbolises the Pandya state's commitment to Brahmanical social values and landholding rights. Copper plate inscriptions, such as the Velvikudi plates, were often issued to formalise land grants and legitimise royal authority, reflecting the socio-political landscape of early medieval South India. These inscriptions reinforced Brahmanical privileges by formally recognising Brahmin land rights and aligning the

ruling powers with religious orthodoxy (Mahalingam 1967: 44; Ramaswamy 1997: 119). The Velvikudi inscription is a prime example of how copper plate grants were used not only as legal tools but also as ideological instruments, positioning the Pandya rule as a corrective to the perceived disruptions of the Kalabhras (Derrett 1968: 217; Gurukkal 2012: 189).

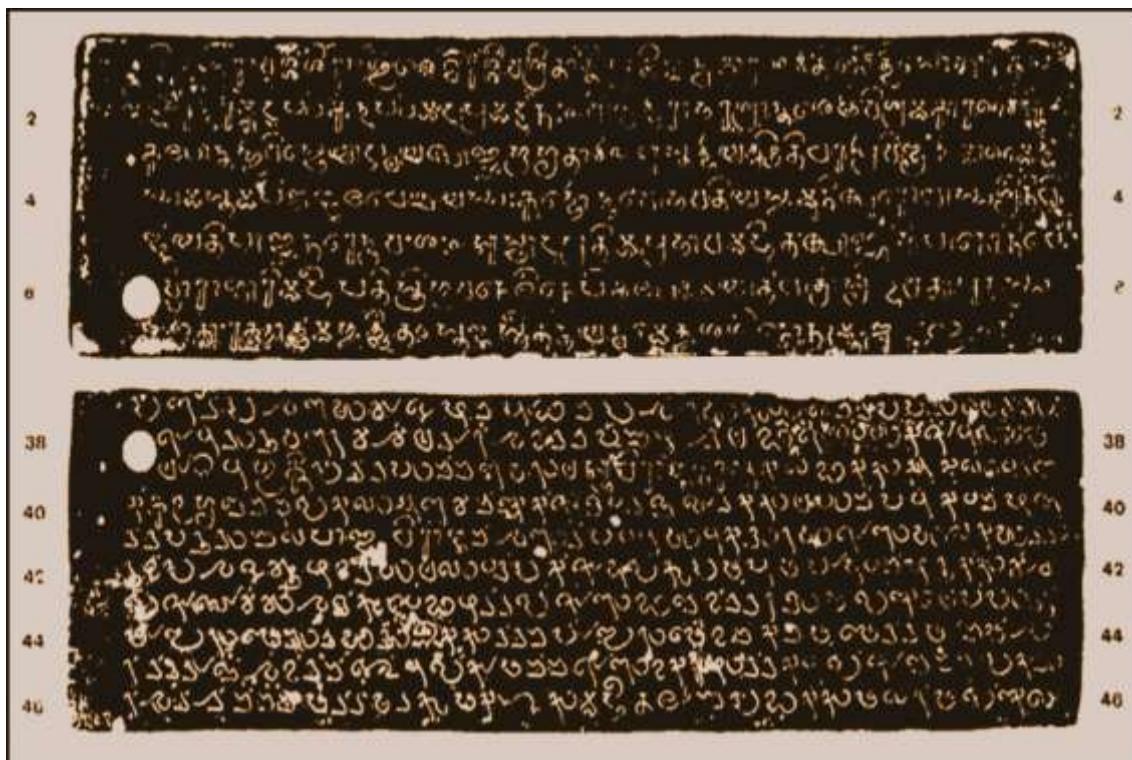


Figure 1: Velvikudi Grant of Nedunjadaiyan (Courtesy: Epigraphia Indica 17: 299-300)

The emphasis on land restoration in the Velvikudi inscription reflects a broader trend in early South Indian epigraphy, where inscriptions often portrayed the Kalabhras period as a time of socio-political disorder. By restoring land to Brahmins, the Pandyas aimed to stabilise the socio-religious order, securing their rule through alliances with the Brahmanical elite. This restoration was seen as part of a political strategy to reinforce state legitimacy and reaffirm traditional hierarchies (Pillai 1975: 78; Hultzsch 1899: 88).

The Kalabhras Period and Its Depiction in Epigraphy

The Kalabhras period is often viewed through the lens of later dynasties, who portrayed the Kalabhras as disruptors of established socio-political and religious norms (Sastri 1955: 127). Scholars like K.A. Nilakanta Sastri suggest that this portrayal was shaped by dynastic agendas, as inscriptions from the Pallavas, Chalukyas, and Pandyas constructed a narrative that aligned the Kalabhras with heterodox practices, including Jainism and Buddhism, as opposed to Brahmanical traditions (Venkataraman 1986: 87; Menon 2020: 56). Inscriptions like the Velvikudi plates were instrumental in

constructing this image, contrasting the Pandya rule with that of the Kalabhras and presenting the former as a return to orthodox values (Rajan 2000: 112). This depiction contributed to a constructed memory of the Kalabhra period as a dark phase in Tamilakam's history, marked by a deviation from traditional religious and social practices (Mahalingam 1975: 58; Hultzsch 1899: 74).

Ideological Dimensions of the Velvikudi Inscription

The Velvikudi Copper Plate inscription serves as a testament to the Pandya dynasty's ideological alignment with Brahmanical traditions. By portraying the restoration as an act of divine sanction, the Pandya rulers reinforced their legitimacy, aligning their rule with religious orthodoxy and distancing themselves from the Kalabhra influence (Karashima 2014: 145; Mahadevan 2003: 117). This ideological positioning is further evident in the inscription's language, which frames the Pandyas as agents of restoration, actively reclaiming Brahmanical authority. By restoring Brahmin lands, the Pandyas not only secured the support of the religious elite but also symbolically cleansed Tamil society of the Kalabhra influence, reaffirming their commitment to Brahmanical values (Veluthat 2012: 102). The Velvikudi inscription, therefore, serves as both a legal record and a political statement, positioning the Pandyas as rightful rulers in contrast to the perceived heterodoxy of the Kalabhras (Sastri 1955: 131).

Although the Velvikudi inscription casts the Kalabhras as disruptors, it also indirectly acknowledges their substantial impact on the socio-political landscape. The need for the Pandyas to issue a formal restoration grant indicates that the Kalabhras had successfully altered landholding patterns and disrupted traditional power structures (Wagoner 1993: 109; Gurukkal 2012: 178). This suggests that the Kalabhra period may not have been a time of mere chaos but rather a period marked by significant cultural and political transformation (Singh 2008: 132; Ramaswamy 1997: 98). The Kalabhras' association with heterodox beliefs, such as Buddhism and Jainism, implies a phase of religious diversity that challenged the Brahmanical hegemony (Subrahmanyam 1990: 107; Spuler 1975: 213). The Velvikudi inscription, in this light, reflects the complexities of the Kalabhra period, where the reassertion of Brahmanical orthodoxy by later dynasties was as much a political strategy as it was a religious imperative (Mahalingam 1967: 63; Menon 2020: 58). Kalabhras patronising alternative religions, specifically Buddhism and Jainism, which indicates a deviation from the dominant Brahmanical practices of the time (Ramaswamy 1997:6). This support for non-Hindu sects likely contributed to the religious diversification in the Tamil region, albeit intensifying conflicts with emerging dynasties like the Pallavas, who subsequently consolidated power through campaigns to restore traditional order (Ramaswamy, 1997:69).

Epigraphy offers a crucial framework for reconstructing South Indian history, particularly for understudied periods like the Kalabhra interregnum. Inscriptions such as the Velvikudi Copper Plates not only document administrative actions but also provide insights into ideological and religious shifts (Stein 1980: 140; Hultzsch 1899:

51). Through these inscriptions, historians gain a nuanced understanding of the power dynamics, cultural shifts, and ideological narratives that shaped early medieval *Tamilakam* (Kulke & Rothermund 2004: 145; Zvelebil 1992: 121). The Velvikudi inscription exemplifies the role of epigraphy in reconstructing historical narratives, challenging monolithic portrayals of the Kalabhra period as a time of decline. By examining these inscriptions, scholars can better appreciate the socio-political and cultural transitions that characterised the period, revealing a complex interplay of conflict, integration, and restoration (Nagashwamy 2006: 62; Venkayya 1911: 129).

Conclusion

The Velvikudi Copper Plate inscription provides a vital historical lens through which to re-evaluate the Kalabhra period in South Indian history. Traditionally viewed as a time of socio-political disorder, the Kalabhra era was marked by shifts in governance, religious patronage, and social structures. The Velvikudi inscription, by documenting the Pandya restoration of Brahmanical land rights, portrays the Kalabhra rule as a deviation from orthodox norms, reinforcing the Pandya's role as restorers of traditional authority. This portrayal underscores how epigraphy served as administrative records, ideological tools, enabling rulers to craft narratives of legitimacy and continuity. The complexities within the Kalabhra period, suggested through their heterodox affiliations with religions such as Buddhism and Jainism, reflect a culturally dynamic era rather than a simplistic 'dark age.' The act of land restoration recorded in the Velvikudi plates reflects the extent to which the Kalabhras influenced the pre-Kalabhra traditions. In studying inscriptions like Velvikudi Grant, the researchers gain a nuanced understanding of the interplay between political authority and religious alignment in early medieval *Tamilakam*. The Kalabhra period emerges as a phase of disruption, as one of transformation, fostering new interactions among diverse social and religious elements. The Velvikudi inscription, therefore, contributes to a more balanced historical narrative, recognising the Kalabhra period's impact on the evolution of Tamil society, while illuminating the ideological significance of epigraphy in shaping historical memory.

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